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Pedagogical Reflections on Internalizing Geopolitical Representations in Print Media

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Pedagogical Reflections on Internalizing Geopolitical Representations in Print Media

Abstract
This essay explores how print media conceals implicit hegemonic texts that common readers unsuspectingly tend to internalize. These geopolitically infused texts are set to appropriate the reader's worldviews by sublimating the kind of perceptions and notions they want to promote. This paper raises questions and awareness about how academia responds to these acts of internalization. These geopolitical texts, which dominate most of the print media and other resources, function at an imperceptible level to legitimize presuppositions and mould the world based on its own political imaginaries. To decode and interpret these largely shrewd texts requires a literacy skill that students need to acquire in different academic disciplines. This essay, therefore, explores how print media, such as newspapers and comics, attempts to legitimize knowledge through reports and stories that work at the subliminal level. Since all readers, students, instructors or researchers are vulnerable observers (Behar, 1996), because of our fallible human nature, the act of internalizing mediascaped knowledge becomes alarmingly simple and crucially effective on the way we are directed to perceive the world. By analogy, geopolitical texts are these id-instigated drives that the superego often suppresses and filters into dreams and fiction and yet they ominously somehow found their way out; they stealthily found expression and now they paint reality with their own biased colors. Can readers in the context be dream catchers?

Cet article explore la manière dont les médias écrits dissimulent les textes hégémoniques implicites que les lecteurs ordinaires semblent assimiler à leur insu. Ces textes géopolitiquement insufflés sont appelés à approprier la vision du monde des lecteurs en sublimant le type de perceptions et de notions qu'ils souhaitent promouvoir. Cet article soulève des questions et sensibilise l'opinion sur la manière dont le monde universitaire répond à ces actes d'assimilation. Ces textes géopolitiques, qui dominent la majorité des médias écrits et autres ressources, fonctionnent à un niveau imperceptible afin de légitimer les présuppositions et façonner le monde sur la base de son propre imaginaire politique. Pour décoder et interpréter ces textes hautement astucieux, il faut avoir des capacités de lecture que les étudiants doivent acquérir dans diverses disciplines universitaires. Par conséquent, cet article explore comment les médias écrits, tels que les journaux et les bandes dessinées, tentent de légitimer la connaissance par le biais de rapports et de récits qui agissent au niveau subliminal. Du fait que tous les lecteurs, tous les étudiants, tous les instructeurs ou tous les chercheurs sont des observateurs vulnérables (Behar, 1996), du fait de notre nature humaine faible, l'acte qui consiste à assimiler la connaissance du paysage médiatique devient dangereusement simple et extrêmement efficace sur la manière dont nous sommes poussés à percevoir le monde. Par analogie, les textes géopolitiques sont des volontés menées par le besoin d'identité que le super-ego réprime et filtre souvent pour en faire des rêves et des fictions, et pourtant, d'une manière ou d'une autre, ces volontés réussissent quand même à trouver leur chemin; elles ont furtivement trouvé comment s'exprimer et maintenant, elles dépeignent une réalité colorée de leurs propres préjugés. Est-ce que dans ce contexte, les lecteurs peuvent devenir des capteurs de rêves?

Keywords
print media, comics, mediascapes, Freud, internalization

It was June 27, 2012, and the front page headline on the morning's *Metro* newspaper was "Racism Study Finds Edmonton Tolerant City." I began to read: "Edmonton is a friendly, welcoming place that encourages diversity — but 29 per cent think newcomers should change to be more like the rest of us" (Tougas, 2012). The writer of the article explained that the report was based on an extensive study involving over 400 Edmontonians, and it was conducted by the Population Research Lab at the University of Alberta: "Those were two of the results of an extensive survey of Edmontonians' opinions on discrimination, conducted by the Racism Free Edmonton initiative, a collaboration of 16 city organizations that promote a racism free city" (Tougas, 2012).

A researcher likely would have wanted to investigate further and perhaps read the original research paper. However, general readers likely would take this piece at face value; not only because it is in the newspaper but also because it is research-based. Such an article could be seen to indicate that Edmonton is a very appealing city for newcomers. I will argue here that this newspaper article is exemplary of how a seemingly harmless and yet implicitly hegemonic piece generates a geopolitical text that appropriates the reader's own mental map of the surrounding world and produces a camouflage of uniformity. Non-mainstream students might tend to be more susceptible to that hegemonic effect as they tend to strive for social conformity. The issue of how mass or print media texts force certain geopolitical perceptions to arrogate legitimacy is central to pedagogical practices. I am interested in the way immigrant or second-generation students and international students alike conceive and construct their local worlds as informed by print media.

In *Understanding Multimedia Documents*, Rouet, Lowe and Schnotz (2008) explain how understanding has become a rigorous and intricate endeavor in a world that is largely informed by multimedia documents: "Individuals must be able to access relevant information from text, pictures or other types of external representations, to decode and interpret the corresponding documents, and to integrate information from multiple sources" (p. 1). Print media documents such as newspapers, magazines, and comics have persistently become more influential on the way students construct their own worldviews. Curriculum thinkers have asserted the impact of mass media texts on knowledge acquisition. Horn's (2002) *Understanding Educational Reform: A Reference Book*, for instance, explores how mass media exercises a tremendous impact on the implementation of education and learning. However, educationalists, instructors, and curriculum thinkers need to unpack further the implications of that interaction outside the walls of the classroom in terms of the accrued perceptions and repercussions of geopolitical texts. To acquire the literacy skill that uncovers the hegemonic implications that some media texts subtly convey, and to be aware of these embedded socio-political messages, would help non-mainstream students to unload the burden of enforced assimilation and resist being bound to nationalistic narratives that are often reinforced by geopolitical texts.

Geopolitics negotiates spatial representations within power relations. According to Ó Tuathail (1996), geopolitics attempts to "problematize how global space is incessantly reimagined and rewritten by centers of power and authority" (p. 249). It is concerned with conjuring up images that provoke "the practice of states controlling and competing for territory" (Flint, 2006, p. 13). In this context, geopolitics is "more than the competition over territory and the means of justifying such actions: geopolitics is a way of 'seeing' the world" (Flint, 2006, p. 13). Moreover, Gilmartin and Kofman (2004) stress "the significance of geopolitics as a form of thought and practice in the acquisition and peopling of imperial settlements and knowledge of the world" (p. 113). When immigrant/international students infiltrate borders, they become subjected to "a continuation of imperial practices" as they challenge the same "obsession with maintaining, strengthening, and enforcing borders, particularly from the perspective of more powerful states"

(Gilmartin & Kofman 2004, p. 120). Such texts – the article discussed earlier is a case in point – redefine "the national" by making new sense of 'the international' from the perspective of the powerful homeland. It continues imperial practices that seek to privilege and protect centers of power through the construction of difference ... It continues to bear the scars of its imperial past in the continued construction of hierarchies of difference. (Gilmartin & Kofman 2004, p. 121)
The way these geopolitical texts operate is not often immediately apparent.

The generalized perceptions that print media promote tend to be the product of an interaction between reader/student and a geopolitical text that works on a subliminal level. The response that such media generates effectively incapacitates conscious awareness while succeeding in evoking an impression. Sublimation is a term introduced by Freud (1908d) for the capacity of the sexual instinct to alter its original aim into a non-sexual aim that yields socially valued activities ... since social value lies at the centre of the definition of 'sublimation', the concept has some cultural specificity built into it. (Akhtar, 2009, pp. 272-273)

The concept also subsumes other socially valued activities that have a propensity to alter the aim of certain emotional drives and perceptions. The result of that intricate process is a perception that, for instance, renders Edmonton to be a "tolerant city" without much questioning of the premise. Not only is this process of sublimation directed towards forming a conception about a particular city, it but can also function at a different, deeper level. It can be geared towards manipulating, directing and accelerating the potential act of becoming that non-mainstream students undergo. This forced and generalizing perception of the amiability of a city, which the *Metro* article conveys, sublimates the act of becoming "like the rest of us." What it actually sublimates is the disheartening endeavour of denouncing the self as informed by cultural identity, which students' behaviour, values, skin colour, and accent may betray, into a favourable act of embracing another identity that is more mainstream and therefore socially acceptable. In effect, a kind of *a priori* understanding emerges: in order for Edmonton to be viewed as "tolerant," newcomers need to be "like the rest of us." The city, in this case, arguably can be viewed as a macrocosmic representation of the school compound. In this sense, schools are "tolerant" to new students who are willing to change and assimilate. The question that remains unanswered here is, how do we discern the almost imperceptible dividing line between congenial integration and the enforced societal, normalizing demands that geopolitical texts transmit?

In "Understanding the Racialized Identities of Asian Students in Predominantly White Schools," Quach, Jo, and Urrieta (2009) describe how students "made purposeful moves of power by choosing White friends, learning Standard English and changing their physical appearances as a way to connect to the dominant culture while distancing themselves from minority groups who were perceived as less successful" (p. 126). That kind of urgency to blend into a homogeneous social fabric necessitates a better understanding of geopolitical texts that reinforce power dynamics. Similarly, Adu-Febiri and Ofori (2009) find that the culture shock often experienced by international students studying in Canadian undergraduate and graduate programs is similar to that of immigrant ethnic minority as they all need help to seal the "cracks in the barriers to minority success in Canada that can be opened up to facilitate the socio-economic mobility of racial/ethnic minorities" (p. xi). The key towards congenial integration, through deconstructing power relations and alleviating the pressure to become "like us," is to know how "the Canadian society and the education system operate" (p. xvi). Knowing the socio-political constructs and representations, so often informed (or misinformed) by print media among other resources, is one way to pluck the heart of the mystery for immigrant and international students alike.

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Entrapped in this already-framed social discourse of becoming "like us," – which is accentuated by mass and print media – non-mainstream students perceive the transformation from who they are into who they are expected to become as not only normal but as imperative. In this context, learning how to interpret mass and print media becomes a liberating exercise that non-mainstream students need to acquire as an additional literacy skill in order to circumvent social hegemony: "This relearning how to perceive is not merely a matter of changing one's mind about matters. It may mean, in fact, a matter of changing one's circumstances or changing one's habits of living" (Sumara & Carson, 1997, p. xvii). Equally important is developing the critical skill "to decode and interpret the corresponding documents, and to integrate information from multiple sources" (Rouet, Lowe, & Schnotz 2009, p. 1). Accordingly, breaking the chains of hegemonic social values becomes the instructor's burden as an individual who seeks to be part of the community of intellectuals who, according to Said (1994), strive to overcome "habits of expression [that] already exist" rather than to "preserve the status quo, and to make certain that things go smoothly, unchanged and unchallenged" (p. 121). Instructors/teachers need to raise awareness about how immigrant and international students may tend to internalize such subliminal messages, which may have an evasive effect of training them to mimic and then dissipate into the seamless multitudes as the only acceptable way to function in the receiving community.

In light of such awareness, the article in the *Metro* can be read not as journalistic reporting but as a geopolitical text, as the geopolitical implications determine the ways in which the reader perceives a particular geography. In other words, the experience of reading the world, local or global, through a newspaper renders the reader vulnerable to a political agenda of forced assimilation. Behar (1996) explains that we become vulnerable because the involvement of our emotional and intellectual connections leaves us barely scrutinized: "Vulnerability doesn't mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to" (Behar, 1996, p. 14). Accordingly, international and immigrant students, immensely desperate to blend in, become readily susceptible to print media. Devereux insists that the subjectivity of the observer "influences the course of the observed event" (as cited in Behar, 1996, p. 6). He advises the use of "methods" that reduce the intervention of subjectivity and prompt a more pragmatic form of observation. In effect, drawing attention to how geopolitical texts operate so often intrusively against unquestioning, non-mainstream students becomes paramount especially when journalistic news is portrayed as largely unbiased and a reflection of an "objective" state of affairs.

Comics and graphic novels can be another example of how print media sublimates politicized views making them both acceptable and almost imperceptible to readers. Cioffi (2001) speaks of the "politization ... pseudo-elaboration ... deconstruction, and allegorization" of comic strips that disturb "readers by upsetting their previously-held beliefs, and by providing them with narratives whose tantalizing open-endedness resonates long after the reading has ended" (p. 99). In his description of how "superheroes adventures ... shape American public opinion and U.S. government policy," DiPaolo (2011) stresses the importance of examining the influence of superhero narratives on generations of readers since "superhero adventures have been in print and on film for more than seventy years, and have enjoyed a notable resurgence of popularity in the period following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001" (p. 1). In fact, Dittmer (2013) explores "the role of superheroes within popular understandings of geopolitics and international relations ... as a 'reflection' of pre-existing and seemingly innate American values" (p. 2), and superheroes thus become "recognized as a discourse *through which* the world becomes understandable" (p. 2). In effect, like the journalistic piece, comics become another geopolitical

text through which certain socio-political agendas are propagated to assert nationalistic, and conforming narratives.

In the comic book *Justice League of America: Stream of Consciousness*, issue 83, published in September 2003, the Justic League of America (JLA) and the President of the United States react differently to a chemical attack in London. Lex Luthor, the President of the United States, holds the Middle Eastern country of Qurac responsible for the attacks. Even when the JLA capture Professor Ivo who is the real mastermind behind the whole plot, President Luthor ignores the situation and continues to accuse Qurac of terrorism. Luthor insists that his intelligence has the upper hand: "The bioprocessors found in the Napal Metro Control Pods were traced by the U.S.A. to a black market sale on the Qurac border" (Kelly, Cross, & Nguyen, 2003, p. 5). Wonder Woman, as her alter-ego Diana, asserts that Professor Ivo is responsible and that "he has no connections to Qurac." She also questions his intentions: "Mister President, are you proposing a preemptive strike? Without any solid proof that Qurac is guilty of terrorism?" (p. 6). In response to that query, Luthor stresses that he "would rather be judged by history as having moved too soon, rather than too late. That would be a true nightmare" (p. 12). Luthor's comment is reminiscent of former U.S. president Bush's speech in January 2002: "I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons" (cited in Dodds, 2007, p. 13). To question the judgement of the president is to risk being labelled "unpatriotic" or "un-American," which is "a charge levelled at musicians, actors, and intellectuals such as the Dixie Chicks, Martin Sheen, and Noam Chomsky respectively" (Dodds, 2007, p. 14). The allegorical narrative markedly speaks to the American invasion against Iraq and yet the implications remain subtle and elusive to some readers. While Batman's and Diana's positions are antiwar, the Man of Steel remains ambivalent. During the whole two scenes in which the aforementioned two Leaguers speak to the President, Superman is present and yet says nothing! His passivity throws a legitimizing complexion on Luthor's position.

In "A Hate-America Superhero," Elder (2003) reminds us of a time back in 1940 when Superman was keenly decisive as in the short story "How Superman Would End the War" where "the steely-eyed hero charged into Germany to capture Hitler and then into the Soviet Union to apprehend Stalin" (para. 1). Elder launches an attack on Superman's general passivity. The Leaguers' failure to stop the attack on Qurac seems to suggest that such an action has been done for the best. The Hamlet-like hesitancy of the Man of Steel, on a subliminal level, can be compared to American citizens and politicians who thought that this course of action – the removal of a tyrant from the map of the world – would in the long run prove to be the right decision and for this reason stood by and watched it happen, regardless of its inevitable tragic consequences for the Iraqi people (of whom we are reminded when Luthor refers to "Quracci Nationals" [p. 5]). Readers will see the Leaguers' attempt to defy the president as a noble act, and their capturing of the culprit, the super villain Professor Ivo as even more important. Yet, their failure to stop the war reinforces the internalization of the de facto legitimacy of political reality.

It is as if by using these geopolitical texts that work on the subliminal level, print media have found the way to lull and numb our super ego – which, according to the Freudian lexicon, serves as our guardian – thus enabling base instinct to materialize and rule our conscious existence, which we continue to mistake for sheer truth and ultimate reality. Pedagogically, this particular JLA issue can be used to demonstrate to both non-mainstream and mainstream students alike how subliminal socio-political messages can be embedded in the language of geopolitical texts: "Using graphic novels in the classroom can help explain how language works both for and against people and enable students to acquire an appreciation for critical literacy" (Chun, 2009, p.

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144). Print media can therefore be subtly used to perpetuate the acquisition of a certain geopolitical vision such as the appropriation of Superman's image into the nationalist narrative in order to reinforce conformity. Such a description has commonly been associated with the character of Captain America:

> It is, admittedly, a thin line that separates Captain America from Superman: the latter fights for "truth, justice and the American way" ... Still, Superman is generally a pro-social hero, fighting for the American people (among others) rather than for America as an abstract idea. (Dittmer, 2013, p. 3)

Acquiring the critical skill to decode and interpret geopolitical texts in print media has become an essential literacy exercise. The hegemonic impression that these geopolitical texts imprint on the reader, and how it colours his/her view of locations and what it means to be a member of that particular society/nation, is overwhelming. This is how print media translates its incontestable perception of knowledge to imagined spaces of conceived models or abstracts of locales, of cities and citizenship, that determine and remap students/readers' understanding of the world and how they conceptualize identity: "Ultimately it is not writers and artists who construct meaning from comic books, but readers" (Dittmer, 2013, p. 3). In this sense, geopolitical texts function as machines that legitimize what hegemonic societies appropriate as the construction of a positive self-image through the internalization of ideological imaginaries.

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